

# Rewarding young people for pro-social behaviour

Findings  
Informing change

October 2007

There is growing recognition that young people are often unfairly demonised in current debates about anti-social behaviour. This study looks at two projects in Bradford and York that aimed to promote and reward the positive contributions young people could make to their communities.

## Key points

- Reward schemes for young people are being used to address a broad range of issues, including health and educational needs, stimulating volunteering and dealing with anti-social behaviour.
- It is essential when developing a scheme that everyone involved understands the rationale and underlying philosophy of the scheme. This is likely to make it more effective and sustainable.
- Most rewards schemes are small and local. Before investing time and resources in establishing a scheme there is a need to gather local information – including details of any existing rewards schemes – and consult widely with residents, young people and other agencies working in the neighbourhood.
- Offering rewards may have an important role in attracting young people to join schemes. The nature and amount of the reward should be carefully considered and will not generally on its own be enough to keep young people engaged.
- The two incentive schemes included in the study involved limited numbers of people and were in their early stages of implementation, making it impossible to draw firm conclusions on whether they met their broader and longer-term objectives.
- Features that appeared to contribute to success included:
  - sufficient staff and other resources;
  - enjoyable activities that were agreed in consultation with young people;
  - young people trusting the staff;
  - support between members of the scheme;
  - a clearly structured rewards framework.

## The research

By a team from Sheffield Hallam University, examining two reward schemes for young people and reviewing literature on this kind of scheme.

## Background

The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) has been keen to explore ways of both reducing young people's involvement in anti-social behaviour and stimulating growth in tolerance towards young people and their preferred activities. In 2004, JRHT therefore devised a project to reward young people for positive behaviour and making a practical contribution to their community in York.

The basic framework of the scheme is that young people collect 'points' through activities such as dog-walking, litter-collecting, and helping out at community events, then use the points to claim rewards such as meals out, and trips to the cinema and visitor attractions. Support was also given to Royds Community Association (a community-led social enterprise) to develop a rewards scheme on three housing estates in Bradford, operating on similar principles.

Both schemes identified the following aims for their projects:

- stimulating a greater appreciation of the positive contribution young people can make;
- improving young people's self image through rewarding positive behaviour;
- reducing young people's involvement in anti-social behaviour, and
- increasing tolerance amongst adults of the visible presence of young people in the community.

The Bradford scheme had the additional aim of:

- increasing young people's awareness of, and involvement in, community and environmental activities, specifically to address concerns highlighted through the local Neighbourhood Action Planning (NAP) process.

Both schemes sought to target young people over the age of 11 using a variety of forms of recruitment including promotion through local schools, residents' newsletters and word of mouth. Over the period 2004 - 2006 a total of 25 young people were involved in the York scheme, but only one member was actively and consistently engaged. In Bradford the scheme attracted 44 active members, who were organised into cohorts of 10 – 12 members. Each cohort ran until the members had each earned points equating to £200. Examples of activities undertaken are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1: Examples of activities undertaken in the two schemes**

| York  | Bradford   |
|---|--|
| Gardening project   | Dog-walking  |
| Tidying nature reserve                                      | Wrapping Christmas presents and decorating Christmas trees in homes for older people |
| Library project – updating the children's display boards    | Planting trees and bulbs   |
| Litter-picking  | Litter-picking and leaf-sweeping   |
| Removing graffiti and re-painting local community buildings | Helping at community events, including face-painting                                 |
|   | Bench-sculpting  |
|   | Snow-clearing and gritting   |

## Existing rewards schemes

As part of the evaluation, the authors reviewed existing literature on rewards schemes. The review reflected the fact that the majority of incentives initiatives for young people are small-scale, involving limited numbers of people and are in their early stages of implementation, making robust evaluation problematic. Accordingly it is difficult to clearly identify the positive and negative outcomes of rewards schemes in quantitative terms. It is also difficult to disentangle the specific contribution of rewards schemes to changes in local communities – such as reduced fear of crime or levels of anti-social behaviour – from the impacts of other initiatives, making it hard to analyse and weigh up the costs and benefits.

Nonetheless, rewards schemes for young people are being used to address health, education, volunteering and anti-social behaviour.

Amongst them, a number of key dimensions of difference may be identified in terms of their aims and operation, which are likely to have a significant impact on their outcomes (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Key dimensions of difference**

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|  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognising and rewarding existing behaviour</li><li>• Rewarding the behaviour of the majority</li><li>• Rewarding adherence to rules/laws (not engaging in anti-social behaviour)</li><li>• Individualised benefits (skills, training, money, gifts)</li><li>• Universally applied</li><li>• Automatic membership/eligibility</li><li>• Not linked to further sanctions</li><li>• Involves project workers and young people</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Changing existing behaviour</li><li>• Changing the behaviour of the minority</li><li>• Rewarding proactive citizenship (volunteering or environmental work)</li><li>• Collective benefits (improved community relations)</li><li>• Targeted</li><li>• Need to join proactively</li><li>• Linked to sanctions</li><li>• Involves others (parents, businesses)</li></ul> |
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## Evaluating the success of the schemes

The Bradford scheme was more successful at attracting and retaining young people than the York scheme, which had very few active members. A number of factors contributed to this.

### *Clarity of aims*

The literature suggests that it is good practice for rewards schemes to have explicit aims. Both schemes in this evaluation had a key aim of rewarding young people for making a positive contribution to their community. In this sense, the purpose of the initiatives was explicit and participants were given rewards for particular activities undertaken in their local communities. However, the broader philosophy underpinning the two rewards schemes was less clear. Questions of who the projects targeted, and why, reoccurred in the evaluation process because the rationale had not been clearly articulated. Irrespective of the type of initiative or target group, a clear conceptual framework that is mutually agreed, shared and understood by providers and recipients holds better guarantees for effectiveness in meeting its objectives, retaining participants and sustaining itself over a long time frame.

### *Age of participants*

Age emerged as an important factor in recruiting members to the schemes. Both participants and non-participants felt that 15 years was a 'cut-off age' at which point young people are highly unlikely to become involved, irrespective of the nature of activities or rewards. Over-15s were reported as likely to view the scheme as "*geeky and boring*". This was borne out by both schemes experiencing difficulties in engaging and retaining young people beyond 14 years. There was also some evidence, in line with other studies, that it was more difficult to recruit boys to the scheme.

### *Level of reward*

One factor that differentiated these schemes from generic youth work was the element of reward, which was also linked to the activities that were undertaken. The level of reward in Bradford was significantly higher than that in York, with members receiving 10 points per hour, which equated to £5 per hour. In York the points awarded with each activity varied and the amount of money associated with points was sometimes unclear, but always significantly lower than in Bradford. There was some evidence that the financial reward, when sufficiently large, was an incentive to join the scheme. A longer-term evaluation could usefully address whether rewards schemes with financial incentives have a role to play in 'switching on' an interest among young people, whether this be a pride in their community, environmental awareness, enjoying outdoor activities such as gardening, or working with older members of the community. Thereafter, financial incentives may become less important and less central to maintaining the activity. The level of reward requires careful consideration; pitched too high and it may be consuming resources when young people would have become involved at a lower rate; pitched too low and it may be a disincentive to joining a scheme where young people are expected to carry out activities that adults would not do without payment.

### *Resources*

A particular feature of the differences between the two schemes was the level of resource. The staffing of the Bradford scheme was significantly greater, with two project workers, each working 15 hours per week. In York the scheme was run by a member of staff as part of her existing role within community development, with the assistance of volunteers. Other factors that were significant in the success of the Bradford scheme were the development of activities that the young people enjoyed (e.g. face-painting at community events), the trust that developed between the young people and the staff, and the peer support that emerged between members of the scheme.

### The local context

Another important factor that emerged in evaluating the schemes was an understanding of the local context. The following local contextual issues influenced the development of each scheme:

- In both scheme areas there was a lack of youth work. Young people may join a rewards scheme not because of the rewards but because of a lack of other youth work provision. Older young people (15 -16 years in our sample) are likely to feel negatively towards a rewards scheme if this is perceived as a tokenistic alternative to more general youth work or where there are expectations of participation in activities perceived as negative or demeaning, such as litter picking.
- There was clear evidence in this evaluation of sceptical views towards existing rewards schemes in one area, and very positive attitudes towards rewards schemes in another. A significant factor in this distinction is the different age groups involved. In the Bradford context those aged 9-11 years from a local primary school held more positive views than the 15-16-year-olds from the secondary school in York. In neither case were these experiences and attitudes known, or taken into account, by York or Bradford staff.
- Where young people feel views about them are predominantly negative and there is a high level of regulation/control being imposed upon them, this may have a negative impact on their willingness to take part in such schemes. The perceived regulation and control of young people in York, informed by the institution of the dispersal order in the area where the scheme was operating, appeared to contribute to heightened feelings of anger and resentment among the young people affected. Young people felt this contributed towards cynicism and lack of participation in other schemes aimed at young people that were being delivered at the same time.

- The local and historical context and perceptions of the lead organisation/partnerships involved in the scheme are worth researching prior to establishing a scheme and as an ongoing aspect of monitoring and evaluation. Issues that might appear unrelated (such as recent refurbishment and window replacement) are cited as potential influences on resident group members and parents' support for a scheme.

### Conclusions

During the evaluation period, the Bradford scheme was successfully established as a well-resourced scheme that began to demonstrate some positive outcomes for the young people involved. In contrast, the York scheme suffered from a lack of resources, with ad hoc rewards procedures resulting in lower levels of engagement. An evaluation design that tracks progress over a period of time is recommended for assessing the potential of rewards schemes to produce longer-term outcomes that help promote active citizenship, civil renewal and respect. It should also be acknowledged that while rewards schemes may have a role to play in helping achieve these broader aims, they cannot solve all problems of inter-generational tension, which must be addressed through broader strategies for understanding and dealing with the locally specific causes of community conflict.

### About the project

Drawing on an overview of the use of rewards schemes in promoting civil renewal and strong communities, the study examined two rewards schemes for young people operating in very different socio-economic contexts. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected during 2005-2006, including interviews with key stakeholders, data collection activities involving young people, focus groups with non-participants in both areas and residents' surveys.

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### Further information

The full report **An evaluation of two initiatives to reward young people** by Julia Hirst, Eleanor Formby, Sadie Parr, Judy Nixon, Caroline Hunter and John Flint is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. You can download this report free from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk). The authors have also written a short guide to help people who are thinking of setting up their own reward schemes. This is also available on the JRF website.

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